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ABSTRACT

Responsible editors avoid printing falsehoods, but the public sometimes demands that rumors be covered in the press. One example of such rumors and the way editors deal with them is the "Mutilated Boy." The "Mutilated Boy" rumor has been circulating for decades and involves a brutal attack upon a small boy in a public rest room. The "crime" is almost always presented as racially motivated, making it even more sensational. A number of newspapers in areas where this rumor has surfaced printed editorials denouncing the story as false. Media critics tend to advocate simply ignoring such rumors, however, fearing that readers might notice only that an account of the story was published and not that it was being denounced. This presents a dilemma for newspaper editors, who are often accused of "covering up" if they ignore a rumor, but fear that acknowledging a rumor will only serve to fuel it. Experts seem unable to agree on the socially responsible course of action for editors faced with a persistent rumor, suggesting the need for further research. (A bibliography and 50 endnotes are included.) (AEW)

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THE MUTILATED BOY AND THE PRESS: A RUMOR STUDY

By

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Introduction

A rumor can swirl through a community like the biblical description of the wind that "bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and wither it goeth. . . ." Like the wind, a rumor can hit a city with destructive force.

One of the purposes of this study is to establish a contemporary history of a single, pernicious rumor that some scholars trace back to the earliest days of Christianity. It generally is referred to as the Mutilated Boy or the Castrated Boy rumor, and it was resurgent in the United States beginning in the 1960s and extending into the 1980s. One of its most notable effects is its often-demonstrated ability to cause something akin to panic in communities it has visited.

The purpose of establishing a contemporary history is to apply specific examples of this rumor to scholarly generalizations of what is hypothesized, known or thought to be known about rumor, an inductive process. A

preliminary exploration of literature indicates that this and similar rumors have occupied the interests of psychologists, sociologists, folklorists and others, and make a rich if often contradictory mix of literatures. As it turns out, the Mutilated Boy tale may not be a rumor at all, and may be as usefully understood when it is thought of as a legend.

The second purpose is to learn how editors of daily newspapers determine policy and practice about printing rumors either known to be untrue or impossible to confirm as true, but that are ripping at the fabric of a community just the same.

A presupposition is that responsible editors avoid printing anything about rumors known to be false, but sometimes yield when public pressure for information--confirmation or denial--becomes intense, particularly when there are repeated accusations that the newspaper might be part of a well-intended-but-misguided "cover-up" in the dual interests of preventing or limiting racial friction, and of protecting local businesses, particularly advertisers, from de facto boycotts driven by fear.

The Mutilated Boy is almost always of a different race or ethnic group from his assailants, and the "attack" invariably occurs in a place of business: a department store, a shopping mall, a fast food restaurant, a drive-in theater and so on.

In summary, the purposes of this study are (1) to establish the corpus of this (and closely related) rumors in the framework of a contemporary social and journalistic problem, (2) to define and better understand rumors and the rumor process by applying the specific to the general and (3) to learn how newspaper editors resolve the journalistic issues in a context of

social responsibility, a question made more vexatious because the answer often suggests or even demands departure from accepted traditional values and practices.

The last of these purposes is only touched in this paper. Still to be reported are the results of a survey of 231 managing editors of newspapers with daily circulations of 25,000 or more. They were asked about newsroom philosophies, policies and procedures about investigating and printing stories about false, destructive rumors. Eighty-four editors responded.

They were asked what they did when--or what they would do if--a rumor created widespread public alarm approaching mass hysteria in their community. Did or would that advent generate special and immediate problems for them? How did or would they handle it? Did they or would they print a story about a false rumor? If they did or would, how was it handled or how would they handle it? Basically, what solution best serves readers and the at-large community when a vicious rumor is ravening at the newsroom door?

The Problem

"The question of whether to publish a rumor is neither academic nor uncommon. Rumors . . . often involve important people and (seemingly) newsworthy events."[1] Moreover, because newspapers generally are expected to publish established facts, not rumors, the great difficulty often lies between "simply being a . . . transmission belt for irresponsible statements . . . and having to nail down the absolute, iron-clad authenticity of everything everybody says before you can put it in the paper."[2]

Yet, it is one thing to check every authority and record before being certain that something is, in fact, true. It is quite another thing to check every authority, every record and every lead or angle only to arrive at the reasonable certainty--but not the absolute knowledge--that a rumor is untrue. Where should one go from an apparent journalistic dead-end? If there is not even a scintilla of supporting fact, has the journalist arrived at a secure enough standard of evidence to justify publication flatly stating that this rumor is untrue? Is it both reasonable and professional to publish a rumor if it is labeled a rumor? "The right answer--the responsible answer--might seem obvious: Do not publish them if they are not true."[3]

But, what might seem to be an obviously correct solution sometimes is not. Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw observed that publication of a false rumor, properly identified as untrue, is "particularly important if the rumors are causing widespread public anxiety, even mass hysteria. . . . ."[4]

The debate extends beyond principle to the fear of unintended and undesireable effects of publishing rumor. In an article headlined, "How the Public Was Snake-Bitten by a Rumor," Washington (D.C.) Evening Star staff writer Woody West began an article about rumors with, "Probably the surest way to prolong the life of a rumor is to disclaim it."[5]

West was writing about a false rumor that had substantial currency in the Washington area about a woman who had been bitten by a poisonous snake while rummaging through imported sweaters in a large department store, and he noted that the rumor bore remarkable similarities to an earlier snake bite rumor--that one allegedly occurred in an amusement

park--that had been widely circulated there in the 1940s. He concluded his piece with:[6]

> However, in the Star's files is a letter written 17 years after the amusement park-snake rumor. The writer said he recalled the incident, and was sure that the paper had reported it. He requested a copy of the story about the girl bitten by a snake.
>
> The rumor has lived as fact in at least one mind for nearly two decades and, conceivably, still does.

West's conclusion serves to echo the sentiment of Charles Mackey who wrote in the preface of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds that "Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one."[7]

Similarly, according to sociologist Gary Fine:[8]

> Some stories are hard to believe but some seem faintly credible. Some are flat ridiculous and impossible. But the fact that they get into the papers, on television, gives them that required credibility, that legitimacy. . . . Rumor-fighters might even be counter-productive. Rumors last as long as people are interested in them. Rumor-fighters make the rumor an issue and force people to be interested. It's probably more advantageous to just let the thing die.

The question of approach to publication was asked and answered for the Courier-Journal and Louisville Times in 1981 by Executive Editor Paul Janensch. Under the headline, "Handling of rumors:/Great care serves/newspaper's readers," Janensch wrote a Sunday op-ed piece that began with the question, "How should a news operation handle a rumor?"

In it, Janensch wrote:[9]

> Here's another case study.

> Some years ago, there was a rumor rampant in Louisville that a young boy had been grabbed by a stranger in a major department store and dragged into a restroom, where his penis was slashed off.
>
> There were several variations to the rumor. In some versions, the victim and the assailant were of the same race. In other versions, one was white and the other black.

A few lines later Nanensch wrote, after recounting how he was assigned to work the story and "could not find a shred of evidence that such an incident had occurred:"

> Normally, a responsible newspaper would conclude at this point that there was no story. But because the slashing report was so widespread and apparently believed by so many people, we felt we should shoot it down in public.
>
> And so we ran a story about the rumor--emphasizing that it wasn't true. We pointed out that the rumor was being repeated all over town. We told of police efforts to track down the supposed attack. And we noted that similar rumors--also false--were circulating in other cities.
>
> I think that story was a public service.

The Waterloo Daily Courier took a virtually identical approach in an editorial about the same rumor when it swept that Iowa city in 1967. Under a headline that read, "Ugly Crime Rumor/Is Absolutely False," the Daily Courier wrote:[10]

> ORDINARILY the best way to treat an ugly and unfounded rumor is to ignore it.
>
> But Courier reporters find that one vicious rumor is being widely circulated in Black Hawk County and that, unfortunately, it is being believed.
>
> THE STORY is that a mother in this area allowed her son, aged varying 5 to 12, to enter the men's restroom of a local store and that two youths followed him into the room. When he did not reappear after a considerable time, according to this version of the story, the

> mother called the store manager who entered the restroom to find that the boy had been castrated. In some versions, the incident is alleged to have occurred in a park.
>
> The Courier has checked all local law enforcement agencies and hospitals. None of them have any record of such an atrocity. This is overwhelming evidence that the act did not occur.

The Daily Courier editorial was reprinted in its entirety the following year for a University of Iowa rumor clinic. The publisher of the university's Daily Iowan, John Zug, a retired city editor of the Des Moines Register, appended to it: "The above is an actual editorial that appeared in an Iowa newspaper on November 7, 1967. There is only one statement in the editorial which merits praise. That is the first sentence."[11]

Still earlier, Los Angeles Times columnist Paul Coates wrote in 1965 about mail he had received about the Mutilated Boy after writing an earlier piece. In "An Ugly Lie, Once Nailed Here,/Spreads Eastward to Maryland," Coates wrote:[12]

> THE ODYSSEY OF A HORROR STORY--It was just about a year ago that the people of this area were victimized by an incredibly cruel and filthy hoax.
>
> There was a rumor spreading all across Southern California that a little white boy had been assaulted and mutilated in a public restroom by a band of adult Negroes.
>
> The location of this "atrocity" depended upon the person who was passing along the story.
>
> By phone and mail I heard from dozens of people who claimed they learned about it from somebody who knew somebody who was an eye-witness.

Later in the column, Coates cited reaction mail he received from one man who wrote that he had heard the same story when he was a boy in Nazi Germany, only then it was a German boy and his assailants were Jews. Coates also received a letter from a woman in Silver Spring, Maryland, who

had enclosed a clipping from the Evening Star with the headline, "Vicious and Unfounded/Police Refute Rumors of Mutilation Crime." According to Coates, it "was exactly the same story. Only the locations had changed" to the greater Washington, D.C. area.

It is worth noting that columnists and editorial writers have not had exclusive domain among journalists in attempting to debunk the Mutilated Boy rumor. It also has been the subject of straight news stories and news analyses. San Francisco Examiner reporter Carol Pogash did an analysis in 1980 under "Ugly rumor about mutilated boy/in men's room: why it flourishes." The "victim" there was a 5-year-old black boy who had been castrated by a white man, and the "attack" was variously rumored to have happened at branches of a department store, Meryvn's, at locations in Oakland, Richmond, San Pablo and other communities.

Pogash noted, "In the case of the Meryvn's rumor, most of the persons inquiring about it are black. Some cite a 'cover-up.'"[13] The article also reported that "numbers of irate citizens are calling the media in an effort to find out why the Meryvn's story is being suppressed." The article quoted one woman who told the Examiner, "I believe it because I know things like that are going on this year of 1980. There have been so many killings, particularly in Oakland." Another was quoted as saying, "I don't know. Everybody's been talking about it, so I don't know. It's hard to believe it's not true."

In Raleigh, North Carolina, the "victim" was white and the "assailants" were "several black males" when the rumor arrived there in 1976. The

Raleigh Times ran a side-bar ("Rumor/causes/concern") with a Page 1 story, "Police discount rumor/of child's emasculation." It began:[14]

> A rumor that a young child was emasculated by two men in the restroom of Hardee's on South Wilmington Street has disturbed and frightened scores of Raleigh area residents.
>
> But police, restaurant and hospital officials say vehemently that no such incident has occurred.
>
> Worried callers have flooded The Raleigh Times, area radio stations, and the police department switchboards. Most report hearing remarkably similar versions of the story, and the number of calls has increased sharply in recent days, as the rumor has apparently spread with speed and persistence.

The Raleigh News & Observer, a sister paper, ran a Page 1 story the following day headlined, "Calls Flood Police/Mutilation Rumor Runs Wild," and quoted a Raleigh police detective as saying in the past week his department has received more than 200 telephone inquiries about the mutilation story. The article also said:[15]

> The story in its basic form--and there are variations--is that a young white boy was castrated by two blacks in a rest room of a Hardee hamburger restaurant, was found bleeding on the floor by his mother, and died in a Raleigh hospital.
>
> One varient came in a call to the N&O Friday from a man who said he was hearing from blacks that a black child was castrated by white men.

In 1981, The Sun carried a substantially anecdotal Associated Press piece about the Baltimore Rumor Control Center. It said, in part, about rumors there: "A persistent one recently, that a child had been sexually attacked in the restroom of a fast-food shop, apparently was a total fabrication, according to police and other sources."[16]

Several conclusions may be reached after consideration of these examples of newspaper coverage of the Mutilated Boy rumor, and they fall into two categories. First, as far as newspaper reportage is concerned, journalists are not in agreement on whether or not it should be covered at all. There is wide variation in approaches to coverage when publication is the decision. Of particular interest is the we-don't-usually-do-this-but approach; it reveals the discomfort some apparently feel when venturing into such murky waters. Accompanying this rumor is an often repeated suspicion that the media are part of a "cover-up," frequently in league with law enforcement officials. In every instance newspapers sought to debunk the rumor, and (with one exception that will be discussed later) cited more than one--sometimes several--authoritative sources to establish its falsity.

Second, the Mutilated Boy rumor possesses characteristics not always associated with rumors. It can be seen that it has significant content variation, particularly where race and location is concerned. It is always false, and it has another singular quality that does not vary: an innocent boy always is the victim of a brutal, mature attacker(s) (usually) of another race. From the foregoing examples, it can be seen that the Mutillated Boy rumor has remarkable duration and distribution: coast-to-coast several times over a 17-year-period, 1964 to 1981. It is both attractive and infectious when it occurs. It quickly draws adherents, and it spreads swiftly and with remarkable vigor in a locale. It seems to have a tenacity of its own. Although they are frightened or worse, its adherents are not easily disabused of the belief that, in fact, it did happen and happen "here" or "near here." It is predictable in that it will be associated with a place of business

with an established, easy-to-reference name, usually a well-known department store, fast-food outlet or a shopping mall. Finally, and in addition to the news value such a crime would have, the nature of the rumored atrocity implies ritual killing, a ritual rudely symbolic of genocide.

Survey of the Literature

The literature of rumor springs from several disciplines, notably psychololgy and sociology among the social sciences, and literature and cultural anthropology from which the folklorists derive. This literature survey thus is, of necessity, a limited survey of selected literature.

A more important constraint is the limitation of discussion of rumor theory, belief and knowledge to those aspects most germaine to the press. Psychologists explain rumor on an individualistic basis, and not infrequently suggest something pathological about rumor. Sociologists stress the collective activity and the low degree of formalization in the rumor process. Folklorists approach rumor as something to be expected, an integral part of a culture. Others have drawn from all of these in order to consider rumor in an integrative application to a specific area or problem; particularly pertinent here are applications to racial conflict and to business/commerce. Regardless of orientation or discipline, the study of rumor seems indivisable from consideration of the press, at least at some point. Rarely are the mass media the central concern in the study of rumor, but discussion of them appears to be a ubiquitous.

It is appropriate to first address the definition problem. A dictionary definition offers rumor as "general talk not based on definite knowledge" and "an uncomfirmed report, story, or statement in general circulation." It

lists gossip and hearsay as synonyms. It lists legend as "a story handed down for generations among a people and popularly believed to have a historical basis, although not verifiable." Allport and Postman, whose The Psychology of Rumor is both a wellspring and a point of departure for much of contemporary thought on rumor, observe that "a legend is a rumor that has become part of the verbal heritage."[17]

Brunvand, in The Study of American Folklore, notes that the "spread of legends is analogous to the dissemination of rumors," and he defines legends as "prose narratives regarded by their tellers as true."[18] He also observes that legends are part of folklore, not of history. In The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends, Brunvand declares that "legends pass from person to person by word of mouth, they are retained in group traditions, and they are inevitably found in different versions through time and space."[19]

Shibutani, a sociologist and author of Improvised News, sees rumor as a collective transaction, serially transmitted. He wrote that a "rumor may be regarded as something that is constantly being constructed; when the communicative activity ceases, the rumor no longer exists."[20]

Rostow, whose 1974 essay, "On Rumor,"[21] established many of the notions that were to be advanced in his book with Gary Fine, Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay,[22] defined rumor in the earlier work as "a communication process (or pattern) as well as a product . . . that is easily started and disseminated but which may be difficult to stop, and . . . is constructed around unauthenticated information."[23]

In Rumor in the Marketplace, Koenig turned to an earlier Rostow and Fine definition of rumor, "a proposition that is unverified and in general circulation."[24]

Knopf, in Rumors, Race and Riots, defined rumor by what she called "elements of rumor." She wrote that a rumor may refer to a particular person, object, event or issue; it must be topical and of some interest to the public, it must be unverified, the hearer must be proximal to the source and the source should be regarded as objective and defined as authoritative.[25] The only remarkable difference in Knopf's construction is that most other students of rumor would instead regard it as "gossip" if an unverified report were circulating about a particular person.

For purposes here, the Mutilated Boy story is considered a rumor because it meets at least the gist of all the definitions, and appears to fall short of at least one and possibly two key constructions of the definition of legend, at least as represented here. It seems too discontinuous to be part of our verbal heritage, and it is not "known" in the same way that many other aspects of culture and tradition are known. If it were generally "known," it would not generate hysteria in communities, it would not cause epidemics of phone calls to newsrooms and police stations and it would never appear in print as news, except possibly on Monday mornings after wholly uneventful weekends.

The Psychology of Rumor was first published in 1947, and it was based largely on laboratory experiments designed to show how individuals received, understood and passed on rumors. Allport and Postman, the authors, were able to confirm a great deal of earlier work in their central

thesis that individuals level (they omit questionable or uncertain information) and sharpen (they remember only a limited number of details) as they assimilate rumor (to incorporate into one's self), a process "which has to do with the powerful attractive force exerted upon rumor by the intellectual and emotional context existing in the listener's mind."[26] Much of their work was colored by World War II rumors and the problems they posed in the context of wartime propaganda; much of the earlier work they confirmed was conducted in the lengthening shadows that preceded or attended wartime.

They observed that in countries where the press serves a totalitarian government (they cited Germany, Italy and Japan as examples), the press may become the fountainhead of rumors. They also point to editors who mistake the authenticity of a "news release" and to irresponsible editors who rely on the public's shortness of memory and its indisposition to check up on facts when they deliberately distort or sensationalize.

They wrote:[27]

> Yet in principle the sharp opposition between news and rumor remains inviolable. The former is characterized ideally by its conformity with secure standards of evidence, the latter by the absence of such conformity. But as clear as this theoretical distinction is between news and rumor, it is not always effective in the minds of the public.

They said that merely labeling something as a rumor is insufficient to deter belief because pre-existing attitude, such as a pre-disposition to believe something, is more important than any label. To Allport and

Postman, this meant that "one cannot kill rumors merely by tagging them," and that "more strenuous methods of refutation . . . are required."[28]

The theme behind the title of Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor involves the conditions of rumor construction. Rumor emerges in ambiguous, problematic situations, Shibutani writes, and concerned people become a thwarted, frustrated public when they unsuccessfully seek reliable information from traditional institutions. "If enough news is not available to meet the problematic situation, a definition must be improvised. Rumor is the collective transaction in which such improvisation occurs.[29] Hence the term, "improvised news." He also wrote, "Where faith in institutional channels is high, people rely on rumors only because of insufficient news from more trusted sources,"[30] and "if unsatisfied demand for news is excessive, collective excitement becomes intense, and rumor construction occurs extemporaneously through spontaneously formed channels."[31]

Shibutani observes that the "announced ideal in journalism is the clear, impartial, and accurate description of significant events," but he also discusses the problems of inaccuracy, space limitations, objectivity, slanting and unreliable sources. He concludes that, while the role of the journalist is not easy, news media have a vested interest in providing accurate news because any medium is distrusted as an information source when a public has defined it as unreliable.[32] Shibutani suggests that an alert and respected newspaper or other news source can be effective in reducing the formation of rumors, in limiting their spread and in shortening their duration.

Shibutani insists that rumor is most usefully studied when it is regarded as a social phenomenon, and he pointedly departs from what he

characterized as "the individualistic bias of most psychologists and psychiatrists" that leads them to view rumor as a "pathological phenomenon." He wrote:[33]

> Instead of studying the conditions under which a recurrent form of communication takes place, investigators have been preoccupied with distortion of content, special defects of those who introduce error, neurotic traits of "rumor mongers," and ways of removing obstacles to normal communication, which is presumably accurate.

The importance of viewpoint as well as the role of the mass media in understanding and in dealing with rumors is well illustrated by the occurrance of the Mutilated Boy tale in rumor-ravaged Detroit in the winter of 1967-68, months after race rioting had hit the city in June, 1967.

Detroit newspapers had been on strike several weeks, and rumors had been running rampant when the mayor went on television March 6 to announce establishment of a rumor control center in the offices of the Detroit Community Relations Commission. Three days later the Windsor Star, a Canadian newspaper being circulated widely in Detroit during the strike, ran a John Lindblad column, "Now," about the rumor that, deep into it, added some observations about how "preposterous" the rumor was. "But the castration rumor was written in such detail and began the article so realistically, that the effort backfired. The rumor spread further."[34]

The Rumor Control Center, which was to receive as many as 1,600 calls a day, noted that callers reporting or asking about the Mutilated Boy rumor "often said that they had read it as a news story in the Windsor Star."[35]

Lindblad's 23-pica-wide column* ran beneath a 130-point Benday overlay, RUMOR. It graphically recounted the crime and the discovery of the boy in the bathroom in a column that began:[36]

> LAST FRIDAY, a Chatham woman and her 11-year-old son visited Detroit on a shopping trip, an annual event for the family and thousands of other Canadians who live short driving distance from the city that put the world on wheels.

Seven paragraphs later it said:

> The gruesome crime has been virtually "hushed up." The Detroit newspaper shutdown, now in its third month, has coincidentally assisted this, but the ticking time-bomb riot conditions of Detroit are such that all news media are cooperating to suppress anything of a nature that could explode the Motor City into a riot, more murderous and damaging than last summer's.

Thus was the rumor in Detroit. A psychiatrist who had done a study of the Mutilated Boy rumor in 1964, Bruce Danto, a former director of the Detroit Mental Health Institute, explained his view of the "significant elements in the rumor." As cited in "Where Rumor Raged," Danto said:[37]

> First, the mother takes her son into a situation that eventually destroys him. The implication here is that something terrible will happen to young boys the minute they leave the protection of their mother. The age of the boy in the rumor is usually from seven to nine, a time when little boys are coping with Oedipal feelings about their mothers, a time when many have unconscious fears of penis loss. In addition . . . women as well as men may have fantasies of castration along these lines.

How much or how little of the Mutilated Boy rumor is adequately explained by Danto remains open, but it seems a reasonable assumption that

March 9, 1968 - early editions only

Now

By JOHN LINDBLAD

(Notes for a weekend reader)

LAST FRIDAY, a Chatham woman and her 11-year-old son visited Detroit on a shopping trip, an annual event for the family and thousands of other Canadians who live short driving distance from the city that put the world on wheels.

The pleasant day was nearing its end when they entered the J. L. Hudson Store, [illegible] America's greatest merchandising outlets. For the boy, the store was a fairyland-like block filled floor on floor of everything imaginable.

After almost an hour of tagging along with his mother in wonderment, the boy whispered that he had to go to the toilet. They both looked around for a rest room and when they couldn't find one asked a clerk. The boy was directed to the rest room and the mother examined imported sweaters while waiting.

The mother had examined dozens of sweaters when she wondered what was taking her son so long. She put her worry down to unnecessary concern and moved to a table neatly piled with gaily colored mini-skirts. Still no boy. She gave him one more minute then approached a floor supervisor who stood talking to a clerk. Learning her problem, the man chuckled "you know boys," but hastened away to bring him back.

The men's room was empty when he entered, but from the end toilet cubicle she heard moaning. "My, God, the boy's sick," he thought and ran to the open cubicle door. And he looked down [illegible] The boy, half-sitting, sprawled in a corner, his trousers at his ankles. Blood oozed into the trousers and spread over the floor. The boy had been badly mutilated.

Within minutes police had arrived. Behind an "Out of Order" sign on the rest room door a doctor was attending the mother while ambulance attendants gently placed the boy on a stretcher. Near the row of wash basins, a detective jotted notes while his partner questioned the floor supervisor.

Investigation revealed two teen-age Negro boys had been seen to enter the rest-room shortly before the Chatham boy. They had been seen leaving shortly after. A clerk whose station is near the rest room was certain of the timing because she had noticed the Negro boys' [illegible] at their loud laughter.

The gruesome crime has been virtually "hushed up." The Detroit newspaper shutdown, now in its third month, has coincidentally assisted this, but the ticking time-bomb riot conditions of Detroit are such that all news media are co-operating to suppress anything of a nature that could explode the Motor City into a [illegible] more murderous and damaging than last summer's.

THREE OTHER [illegible] show Detroit's great torment. . . . The Special Control Division of Detroit Police which has liaison operations [illegible] the State, the FBI and the Department of Justice is checking, with in-field undercover agents on reports Negro militant "terrorists" plan to execute 10 white children, one [illegible] for each of the Negro victims of last summer's riots. The second file-case involves the [illegible] Negro [illegible] planning a Free-way "[illegible]" on which cars will be tipped over and b[illegible] occupants slaughtered. The third file-case involves the kidnapping of three suburban teen-age girls who were held in the John R. district and raped over a period of [illegible] days by 27 persons, as yet unknown.

Of far greater concern to Detroit authorities—because it concerns entire blocks of people rather than individuals—is the case currently under a "Task Force" investigation. The case involves the systematic "invasion" of several Detroit suburbs. In a Viet-Cong-like terror operation, revealed by a Negro under-cover operative who has since disappeared, "lightning raids" will swoop into the suburbs on a kill and destroy series of raids.

The special Task Force is working around the clock to learn the exact hour and date of the terror raids. In the meantime, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh has been given sweeping powers following a secret session of Common Council. His riot-control plan, rapidly taking shape will be aided by a special Army brigade stationed in Kentucky that can be airlifted fully-equipped on one-hour's notice.

Such are the tense conditions of Detroit today.

THE "RUMOR MILL" has spread all these stories—and hundreds more—throughout the Motor City area. That Detroit and other U.S. cities faced possible long and violent summer is worrying, but the rumors, whispered as gospel by people "really in the know" here, left America's fifth largest city almost panic-stricken.

The "rumor mill," often regarded as only a worrying joke grew into such proportions—and danger—this week that Detroit set up a Rumor Control Centre. By dialing 963-9550, Detroiters can check off the rumors. And the newly set up office will probably do a land-office business. The city seethed with rumors, passed along from the street to the executive suite. And because of the close proximity of Windsor and the fact thousands here work in the Motor City, this area is an echo-chamber of the rumors—naturally passed on as fact.

In the case of the first rumor reported above, it is told with changing style. The boy becomes a girl. The home becomes Inkster, or Washington, D.C. And in each telling, the passer believes it and convinces his listener. I first heard this last year from a Windsor executive and his wife. I heard it again last Sunday from a commuter who works the executive suite and swore it was true. A Detroit official told me he [illegible] a few years ago.)

And such are the [illegible] conditions of Detroit today.

Some may think it fantastic that a major city has been tied in emotional knots by rumors. Anyone who has been exposed to real classics, such as Detroit is experiencing, will not think it "fantastic." Entire army commands, right up to the general, have been tied up by the rumor mill.

YOUR DAY IN COURT — Time and again, this self-appointed public defender has urged people to go to court if they are convinced of their innocence or if the charge seems unfair. Nowhere is the need for this approach more needed than on those parking tickets and traffic fines where the system (strike one for Justice) makes it easier to admit guilt than fight for innocence.

No, you won't always win. And sometimes you'll leave cursing because it cost you time as well as money. But, by and large the courts will listen and fairness will prevail. Take this happy-ever-after story. Gal got a ticket down at the market for $15. She was advised to pay it. She blew her stack and demanded her day in court. She got off with $2 fine.

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Shibutani and others would look elsewhere for an answer. The Windsor Star example serves well the Allport and Postman finding that merely affixing the label "rumor" is insufficient. It is worth speculating, too, that the readers' eyes simply may have read past (or through) the huge Benday overlay, never noticing the word. It is not illogical to assume that many readers may not have stayed with the piece until the fifteenth paragraph when it was made clear that the Mutilated Boy incident was not fact but fiction.

The misadventure of the Windsor Star illustrates how a well-intended but ill-considered treatment of a volatile rumor can give unanticipated credence to a false report and, presumably, contribute to its dissemination. More important, the Detroit experience is a telling example of how rumors can flourish when newspapers are silent.

The Mutilated Boy in Detroit also attracted the attention of Rosnow who saw the rumor as one that began as a fictitious report of a threatening incident and progressed into a detailed rumor of fear. He wrote:[38]

> One persistent rumor had it that a young boy--black or white, depending on who told the story--was found castrated in the lavatory of a large downtown department store after he had been taken shopping that day by his mother.

He used the Mutilated Boy as an example in discussing what he saw as the step-like progression of rumors, and he wrote that "Spontaneously occurring rumors may not be altogether unintentional, but they are usually not methodically intentional in the way that persuasive communication is."[39]

With Gary Fine, he later wrote in Rumor and Gossip:[40]

> For these reasons, especially, journalists must be sensitive and responsive to societal problems while endeavoring to avoid becoming part of the problems themselves. To be sure, there is a difference of opinion over the degree of influence, intentional or unintentional, exerted by the mass media. Nontheless, like a divining rod that is oriented to water, the media are by nature oriented to what is novel and dramatic. . . .they help to fashion a picture of reality and define for others what is important or unimportant.

Knopf, in Rumors, Race and Riots, both refines and expands upon many of the notions set forward several years earlier in a widely circulated report of the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University, "The Media in the Riot City."[41] It discussed factors "universally connected" with riots in terms of preconditions, riot phases and social control. Knopf had been associated with the Lemberg Center, and her book advanced concepts of two of the riot preconditions that are particularly pertinent to this discussion, the "hostile belief system" and "inadequate communications." Like the Lemberg study, her book is strongly influenced by the racial riots of the last half of the 1960s in much the same way that the Allport and Postman book was influenced by World War II.

Reduced to the briefest of summaries, Knopf holds that each race, black and white, holds hostile belief systems that make fertile ground for rumors of threat or wrongdoing by the other. She argues that rumors are functionally related to the basic conflicts that give rise to riots, and that rumors are one way of dealing with the conflicts through the medium of the hostile belief system. The news media have a collective history of white bias in publishers' offices and in newsrooms that frequently has led to increases in racial tensions caused by distortions of reality in news. "From the

standpoint of rumor-reporting alone, it is clear that blacks have continually received a raw deal from the American news media," she wrote.[42]

She offered five recommendations to make the media less rumor-prone and less biased against blacks: (1) Enforcement of guidelines (such as the Associated Press guideline, "We don't rush out with rumors of impending trouble"), (2) Exposing rumors, (3) Pressuring the traditional media (to make it more responsive to the needs of society, (4) Racial composition (an almost all-white press is unlikely to be responsive to a complex, racially mixed society) and (5) The Wire Services (must be the target of particular pressure because they are buffered by their clients from the public, and because they tend to reproduce each other's views).[43]

Of these, "Exposing rumors" obviously is most pertinent to the purposes at hand. Knopf wrote, "Hand in hand with the media's responsibility to refrain from reporting rumors is its obligation to expose those rumors making the rounds of the community."[44] She quoted in its entirety a 1967 South Bend Tribune editorial, headlined "Talking Up Trouble," which she said "serves as a model of this important function . . . ." It began: "If there had been no civil disturbance in South Bend the last two nights, a lot of residents would have been disappointed." The editorial continued about "groundless rumors" that had been "rampant in the community." It ended:[45]

> It is hard to document a cause-and-effect connection between rumors and events which follow them. But there are always a few hotheads willing to oblige those who believe the worst, and the more generally trouble is expected, the more likely it is to come.

> We hope that this community has got a grip on itself by now, and that the rumor mongers will be treated with the skepticism that common sense suggests.

As Knopf discussed rumor and the press in the context of race and riot, Koenig discusses it in the context of business and commerce. His Rumor in the Marketplace: The Social Psychology of Commercial Hearsay, primarily addresses rumors and business behemoths. Koenig's relies heavily on the Shibutani and Allport and Postman thesis that rumors erupt in a vacuum of news about seemingly important events. He stresses that there need be no real breakdown in the flow of information; the perception or belief that the public is not getting trustworthy accounts is sufficient for rumors to arise to fill the void. Koenig observes that people frequently believe the media are suppressing distressful news about big businesses because of fear of loss of advertising revenues. He also urges business to launch vigorous media campaigns through press conferences, press releases and other means to refute rumors.

He discusses numerous cases of prominent victims of false rumors, among them McDonald's Corporation, which was widely accused of putting red worm meat in hamburgers and, as was Proctor & Gamble, was just as widely linked to Satanism or to the Church of Satan in different rumors.

Koenig has little regard for business representatives who are unwilling to battle damaging rumors in the mass media. He wrote:[46]

> (The) single most important aim should be to end the rumor as forcefully, as completely and as soon as possible. There appears to be a general, almost mystical reluctance on the part of some public relations people to confront a rumor problem directly, on the premise that public refutation of a rumor may call attention to it and make it

> more widespread than before. In sum, there seems to be a lurking fear that an open campaign will "add fuel to the fire."

Koenig argues that once the story of a false rumor has been released to the media, the "rumor" becomes "news," and news has a different dynamic than a rumor. Publication of the rumor problem as news eliminates one of the principle motivations for repeating the rumor, Koenig says, because it ends the news vacuum. He wrote:[47]

> When a rumor becomes news, it is shared by a whole population, and relating it does not produce the same sensational reaction. In short, the attraction of telling a story can be eliminated by a media campaign which defuses it. A media campaign can reduce the attractiveness of telling a story even more if it makes the rumor look ridiculous.

Koenig also described those who believe and repeat marketplace rumors as isolates who are unpopular, lonely people trying to get attention. His observation supports the axiom, "Every rumor has a public."

Every rumor also has a victim, but not every victim has an aggressive public relations staff. The Mutilated Boy does not, nor do the races with which he is associated. Dealing with that rumor is wholly the responsibility of the media which, without benefit of press release, news conference or advertising copy, must search for corroborating facts and, finding none, must decide how best to refute it if, indeed, the decision is not to ignore it in the hope it soon will go away.

Brunvand, who correctly notes that journalists repeatedly have debunked the Mutilated Boy story only to have it reoccur later or elsewhere and often both, offers what may be the most extensive discussion available of the Mutilated Boy in The Choking Doberman. To him the story is a legend,

something considerably more than a rumor, and he cites scholars who have it back through 19th century England, to Chaucer, to the Middle East and to the early days of Christianity. Brunvand believes that basic prejudices underly the Mutilated Boy legend, and he notes that the "victim" has changed over the years with whatever prejudice had currency at a given time or place. The ones he cites have been Christians, Jews, Hispanics, blacks, whites, homosexuals and hippies.

Brunvand views legends as "having a life all their own" and that, if he is correct, may suggest why the Mutilated Boy always returns. He wrote:[48]

> The problem with most news media searches for the sources of legend is that investigative reporters are interested in the truth or falsity of recent accounts of events, rather than the history or meaning of long-enduring traditions. As a result, the news writer's usual technique is to interview knowledgeable (or even not so knowledgeable) people, seeking to elicit quotable quotations, and trying to get back to what may be called the "authentic source" of the story. Folklorists, on the other hand, know from the start that the ultimate sources of legends are long lost, so they proceed by collecting all possible variants . . . in a larger context than today's news.

Brunvand also told of his response to a Mutilated Boy query from one of his correspondents:[49]

> But I assured her that the restroom story she had heard was a classic example of an unverifiable, widely told traditional legend. The journalists who have tried to find the sources of these reports . . . have invariably reached dead ends; the folklorists who have studied them have readily located many traditional variants and have identified much earlier prototypes.

Tentative Conclusions

None of the news stories cited here has been a rumor story in what might be called the strictest sense of the word. Instead, most of them have been hysteria stories, and all of them have been rumor refutation stories.

Editors appear to dislike dealing with rumor stories, at least with the Mutilated Boy story. The Raleigh News & Observer mentioned that the first Mutilated Boy telephone call "came May 6 from a man who said he was in Fayetteville. In the days to follow, there would be as many as a dozen callers a day asking why they hadn't seen the story in the newspaper."[50] The story appeared May 15, indicating that it wasn't rushed into print. Not only was there no solid time element, more of the remaining "five Ws and an H" were missing than were present if the Mutilated Boy ran true to form.

Moreover, the columns by Paul Coates and Paul Janensch were both retrospective and, the latter more so than the former, defenses of earlier publication of Mutilated Boy stories. Journalists don't often do that, and it suggests an understandable uneasiness caused, perhaps, by the tilting-at-shadows aspect of rumor reporting.

Almost as if Allport and Postman had written the prescription, all but one of the newspapers quoted here used multiple sources to refute the Mutilated Boy story. One cannot kill a rumor merely by saying it is a rumor.

If the Detroit incident is a valid example, rumors do flourish in the absence of trusted news sources, suggesting Shibutani's thesis that "news" is improvised in ambiguous situations during times of insufficient reliable information. Rumors, like mushrooms, grow best in the dark.

As for the definition problem, the Mutilated Boy remains elusive as ever. He does endure through space and time, and his story is a prose narrative regarded by tellers as true. But, if it truly were part of our verbal heritage, why does the story come to town with such a shock and why does it create such hysteria? As a matter of practical reality, the newspapers cited here treated it as a rumor and they called it a rumor.

Of particular concern to some of the scholars was the role played by the press in spreading rumors, particularly to Allport and Postman. Their work originated in the loose-lips-sink-ships era, and that may have lent a different kind of urgency to their concern. Brunvand discussed the role of the press in debunking the Mutilated Boy story in spite of dead-end reporting situations and Knopf discussed the necessity of exposing false rumors. Koenig discussed ways businesses could use the media to help fight adverse rumors. Both Shibutani and Rostow took a more benign view, perhaps even a sanguine one, of the role of the press in rumor circulation.

Shibutani declared the role of the reporter is not easy when it comes to rumors, and Brunvand mentioned working in the "context" of today's news. The evidence suggests the role of editors also can be difficult, the more so because decisions must be made in the context of the edition.

Endnotes

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4. Ibid.

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6. Ibid.

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9. Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal, Nov. 8, 1981.

10. Waterloo (Ia.) Daily Journal, Nov. 7, 1967.

11. Personal papers, the author.

12. Los Angeles Times, April 20, 1965.

13. San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle, Dec. 14,1980.

14. Raleigh (N.C.) Times, May 14, 1976.

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26. Allport and Postman, ibid., p. 100.

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28. Ibid., p. 191.

29. Shibutani, ibid., p. 57.

30. Ibid., p. 131.

31. Ibid., pp. 127-128.

32. Ibid., p. 46.

33. Ibid., p. 8.

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35. Ibid.

36. Windsor (Ont.) Star, March 9, 1968.

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39. Ibid., p. 32.

40. Rostow and Fine, ibid., pp. 104-105.

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42. Knopf, ibid., p. 291.

43. Ibid., pp. 292-301.

44. Ibid., p. 293.

45. Ibid., p. 294.

46. Koenig, ibid., p. 167.

47. Ibid., p. 170.

48. Brunvand, Doberman, pp. 85-86.

49. Ibid., p. 84.

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